



Sam Brownback

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BROWNBACK CHAIRS SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE HEARING ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

WASHINGTON – U.S. Sen. Sam Brownback today chaired a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing entitled “U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: Findings on Sudan, Russia and China.” A portion of Brownback’s statement follows.

“There has been a stunning shift in foreign policy in the last three years involving a recognition of religious liberty as a respected human right, equal to the freedoms of press, speech or assembly,” Brownback said. “This was not true, even a few years ago, when members of Congress and foreign affairs intelligentsia were reluctant to seriously entertain this topic.

“I am grieved by the suffering which results from embracing a minority faith in a hostile country. I think of the countless people in closed countries like China who may never hear a religious message that would comfort their souls in troubled times or give meaning to their lives. It may be fair to say, that of all the rights a country might steal from its people, religious freedom is the most intimate one.

“Then the light broke through the clouds in the form of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This Act, for the first time, began to insert religious liberty in the middle of the foreign policy debate. In the last three years, I believe there have been more conferences and articles on religious freedom than in the several previous decades combined. You can thank the Act as well as many organizations and individuals who work tirelessly and care deeply about religious freedom for this, for helping to popularize the notion that religious freedom is a fundamental, universal human right which transcends the restraints of jealous nations.

“The Act created a Commission which is represented today by five of its members. They will be discussing their first report, issued on May 1, which concentrates on three countries: Sudan, China and Russia. I have worked on religious liberty issues in all three of these countries which you will discuss today. Given this, I am especially interested in the methods by which you intend to implement the recommended actions,” Brownback said.

Witnesses before the committee today included: Robert Seiple, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom; as well as four other Commission members – Rabbi David Saperstein, Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism; Elliott Abrams, Ethics and Public Policy Center; Firuz Kazemzadeh, National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the U.S.; and Nina Shea, Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House.